

Rep. John Conyers hasn't given up the reparations fight

By Linn Washington, Jr.
THE PHILADELPHIA TRIBUNE

Those who think that racism is no longer a real problem for blacks in America "are either naive or they're charlatans" says Rep. John Conyers, (D-Mich).

A long-time advocate of equal rights, Conyers is the congressman who has fought since 1989 for the establishment of a national commission to study the feasibility of paying reparations to blacks as an equitable remedy for the legacy of slavery and post-slavery segregation. Each year, the bill gets bottled up in committee.

President Clinton has established a commission to study racism in America, and some white members of Congress are advocating the issuance of an apology to blacks for slavery.

Conyers feels the presidential commission and the Congressional apology are steps in the right direction; but, standing alone, these well-meaning efforts will fall short of what is

needed to really attack the ravages of racism.

"The president is honest enough to say we have a problem. There is a problem with racism in this country. Good night! Just look at the FBI hate crimes statistics which are on the rise. Look at the burnings of black churches," said Conyers during a telephone interview.

While offering praise for the new initiatives, Conyers is clear on what he thinks is required to meaningfully address the problems spawned and sustained by racism.

"You can't remedy racism without programs," he said. "Individuals are insulated by federal laws barring discrimination in areas like housing and education...but we still have the problem. We still have ghettos in every major city and many small cities, and we've had these for a long time.

"The conditions in these ghettos create crime and the need for welfare," Conyers continued. "We all end up paying for the prob-

lems created by these conditions."

While crediting Clinton, Conyers condemns the stance of House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The Republican leader is opposing the budding bipartisan effort to apologize for slavery and he is supporting an effort by Congressional Republicans to eliminate all federal affirmative action programs.

"The president has asked for a dialogue. He wants a lowering of voices on the race issue," Conyers said. "Newt Gingrich laughs at this. He is working night and day to eliminate any programs to help heal the wounds of racism. He is supporting efforts to strip away what is left of (federal) affirmative action. If he succeeds, these efforts will be copied by state and local governments."

Gingrich has termed the proposed slavery apology "emotional symbolism," contending it will not solve problems. He says he would rather see efforts to improve education.

Conyers said Gingrich's pos-

ture is hypocritical because he really opposes both mechanisms that would help individuals affected by racial discrimination and broader group solutions to problems arising from racism.

"They say they want to help individuals and not groups. They want to help individuals go to medical school, for example. But if you're discriminated against in a medical school admission, you need to get a lawyer. But Gingrich and the Republicans make sure we underfund federal agencies that provide lawyers to fight discrimination cases."

The legacy of racism, beginning with slavery, must be addressed, Conyers says.

"Slavery is a problem. The distinction born in slavery of African Americans (being different from the rest of the country) continues

today. This distinction continues despite actions like amendments to the Constitution, civil rights laws, and voting rights laws. All of these actions still have not eliminated the question of race," Conyers said.

One "obvious" example of the continued existence of racism, Conyers stresses, is in the way African Americans are "locked

up."

The National Criminal Justice Commission's 1996 report stated "racial discrimination...penalizes African Americans at almost every juncture in the criminal justice system." This report cited racism in arrests, bail decisions, severity of charges, prosecutions, sentencing, rates of imprisonment, and imposition of the death penalty.

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Poll: Affirmative action hot topic

By David Williamson.
SPECIAL TO THE POST

CHAPEL HILL - Three-fourths of North Carolinians believe that discrimination remains common, according to a new poll, but they disagree strongly on whether affirmative action should be scrapped.

The survey, conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, involved telephone interviews with 723 randomly selected adult state residents.

"The races disagree sharply about whether affirmative action should be continued," said Beverly Wiggins, associate director for research development at UNC's Institute for Research in Social Science. "Sixty-two percent of blacks say it should be continued, compared to 26 percent of whites."

Respondents were asked to choose from among three statements the one that best represented their views on affirmative action.

Slightly less than half of whites felt affirmative action "has gone on too long," compared to 19 percent of blacks, Wiggins said.

Overall, about a third of respondents agreed with the statement "We need to continue affirmative action because discrimination is still common." Forty-three percent supported the idea that "Discrimination is still com-

mon, but affirmative action has simply gone on too long."

Fifteen percent agreed that "Affirmative action is no longer needed because discrimination has been largely eliminated."

About 10 percent had no opinion or said none of the statements reflected their views.

Thirty-seven percent of women, compared to 24 percent of men thought hiring preferences for minorities should continue, while 41 percent of women and 47 percent of men said they have outlasted their usefulness.

"Small, but essentially equal proportions of blacks and whites take the position that discrimination has been mostly eliminated, but men are almost twice as likely as women to feel this way," Wiggins said.

She found that result somewhat surprising.

"Both blacks and women are targets of discrimination, so I expected that blacks would be less likely than whites and women would be less likely than men to say that discrimination has been largely eliminated. We found the expected result for women, but not for blacks. The survey doesn't tell us why this is so."

A possible reason is that political correctness may apply more to race than to gender, she said. In other words, some whites may believe that discrimination has been nearly

eliminated, but be hesitant to say so for fear that they will appear prejudiced.

"The age group least likely to feel that the problem of discrimination has been solved is the youngest - 18- to 24-year-olds," Wiggins said. "Only 4 percent of that group, compared to 14 percent of 25- to 44-year-olds and 20 percent of those 65 and older said that affirmative action is no longer needed because discrimination has been largely eliminated."

African answers needed for continent's problems

By Tansa Musa
INTERNATIONAL PRESS SERVICE

YAOUNDE, Cameroon - Africa continues to look to others for solutions to its problems, but the answers are right on its own doorstep, said a group of experts who gathered recently in Cameroon to discuss the refugee crisis that is gripping the continent.

"The people of Africa must find their own solutions" and discontinue the syndrome of overdependence on external assistance, said Carlton Karpeh, Liberia's ambassador to Cameroon, who participated in the round table discussion. "But we cannot find any solutions if we do not summon the courage to admit the real cause of the problem."

Although the roots of Africa's refugee crisis are in the post-colonial power struggles, the situation took a different turn when countries became independent, because the new governments sparked more conflict and unrest with their quest to hold onto power, Karpeh said.

African leaders "must accept this (new) reality as the root cause for the new crises that have sent thousands fleeing across the continent away from their home countries," said the Liberian ambassador, who is the

dean of the diplomatic corps here.

Alluding to the conflict in the Congo, Karpeh asked, "Why do two people, one a former president and the other the incumbent president, fight each other in their own country?"

Forces of President Pascal Lissouba and his predecessor Denis Sassou Nguesso have been battling each other since June 5 in the Congolese capital of Brazzaville.

Lissouba has asked the country's Constitutional Council to extend his presidential term, which ends in August, by three months. But Sassou Nguesso, who was to have been his main rival at elections that were set for July 27 but are now postponed indefinitely, is demanding a government of national unity over a two-year transitional period.

The fighting has disrupted the lives of the Congolese people, sending thousands into other parts of the country and across the border. Karpeh also squarely laid the blame for the crisis in Liberia on Charles Taylor's thirst for power. "Why does a man come to a country that is 140 years old and force 667,000 to flee their country in his ruthless quest for

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